Divide and rule

Partition histories are being invoked in election campaigning to deepen social schisms

I f history is an act of remembering, it is equally one of forgetting. In his classic work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson draws attention to this paradox of history, written as ideological prop for a modern nation. The glib assurance with which 19th-century ideologue Ernest Renan could describe the French citizen expresses this contrariness best. “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things,” he said. “Every French citizen is obliged to have forgotten the St Bartholomew massacre and the massacres of the Midi in the 13th century.”

What is curious here is Renan’s reminder that every French citizen is obliged as a civic duty, to forget exactly those aspects of history he is recalling.

The retelling of Indian history during the current election campaign has generally been drowned in copious flows of vitriol and brazen appeals to identity-based voting. The trope of India recovering its identity after millenia of slavery has lost its novelty. As Anderson points out, nationalism is not just about reinventing ancient genealogies; it often involves turning the page and creating new identities premised upon shared values.

That new beginning was the constitutional promise of equal citizenship that India embraced at Independence. Forgetting the trauma Independence brought was in a sense, a civic obligation, if that new beginning was to be real. Re-enacting them would be a way of reviving older genealogical claims and denying particular cultural strains deemed alien.

One of the most vivid re-enactments of the trauma was the campaign that culminated in 1992, to restore the ancient glory of Multan and his Prime Minister. He was worried about the spiral of violence, but encouraged by the visit of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah to Jammu. “There had been considerable excesses by the Hindus there”, Gandhi said: “I don’t know if what happened in Jammu was at the instance of the Maharaja... But these things happened and it is a matter of great shame for us. Still Sheikh Abdullah did not lose his balance and the Hindus in Jammu fully supported him.”

Gandhi was grateful at the integration of Junagadh after a brief siege but alive to signs of trouble in “Kathiawar”, as he saw the region he had been born and raised in. Strife in the region was something he could not countenance. “I have received a telegram from a Muslim at the right moment,” he said. “Kathiawar is a region where the Muslims used to live in peace and nobody ever disturbed them...Now... they wonder if they can live there at all...for me, this is unbearable because I was born in Kathiawar.”

It was an unsettled state and the reconstruction of the Somnath shrine in the circumstances, may have tilted towards triumphalism when the greater need was for reconciliation. Yet in persistently affirming Somnath as part of its nationalist inheritance, the BJP invites the citizen to ignore his civic duty of forgetfulness and continually deny the possibility of a reconciliation of faiths.

To the effect According to the BJP, it was Sardar Patel’s iron will that made the three erstwhile princely states of Jammu & Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh accede to the Union of India. The BJPPhoto Archive

A unified India, PM Modi said, was Patel’s bequest

Three recalcitrant princely states — Jammu & Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh — whose integration into the Indian Union is a story of subtle statesmanship and purposive military coercion. In the political inflection that the BJP imparts, Jawaharlal Nehru is indecisive and effete, while Patel’s determination and iron will were instrumental in concluding all three to India’s advantage.

History now being retrieved from the ideological detritus of Partition tells another story. Christopher Snedden’s recent book, *Kashmir: The Unwritten History*, records with a wealth of evidence, that the integration of Jammu & Kashmir was preceded by a fearsome blood-bath unleashed by the Dogra Maharaja against his subjects in the border regions of Poonch. AG Noorani, in *The Destruction of Hyderabad*, has retrieved the long forgotten inquiry by Pandit Sundarlal, which records the heinous massacre that followed military action in Hyderabad. These retrievals sit alongside stories of large-scale atrocities against people of the minority faith in Awar and Bharatpur, as recorded by Shail Mayaram in her book, *Resisting Regimes*.

Junagadh’s accession, which Prime Minister Modi gestured towards as he inaugurated the Patel statue, did not on available reckoning, involve similar atrocities. But as with all such matters involving the quest for moral clarity, it is useful to look towards Mohandas Karimchand Gandhi.

Addressing a prayer meeting on November 27, 1947, as Kashmir’s fate hung in the balance, Gandhi spoke out against the Dogra Maharaja and his Prime Minister. He was worried about the spiral of violence, but encouraged by the visit of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah to Jammu. “There had been considerable excesses by the Hindus there”, Gandhi said: “I don’t know if what happened in Jammu was at the instance of the Maharaja... But these things happened and it is a matter of great shame for us. Still Sheikh Abdullah did not lose his balance and the Hindus in Jammu fully supported him.”

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